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BRAMBLE AND KNIFE

By

Sara Ryan

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of poems that center on the themes of extinction, family, the female body, and the presence of the animal. During my time in the Upper Peninsula, I found a connection with the natural world around me, and this led to my fascination with animals and extinction, both of which manifested in my poetry. As I struggled with the residual effects of toxic relationships, as well as the bleak romantic landscape of the UP, I saw my own body reflected in the bodies of animals. I specifically noticed this reflection while studying the art of taxidermy; I saw my own struggle with my body in the preservation of the animal body. During my summers at NMU, I was also funded through grants to travel through Scandinavia, as well as various parts of the Midwest, and these travels developed into poems in this manuscript as well, often poems about family and familial history and the slow forgetting of that history. In this thesis, I interrogate what Adrienne Rich calls “a fascination and a terror” in the manifestation of men in women’s writing. I also see this fascination and terror in the animal body, as well as in the themes of extinction, both natural and familial. The collecting of these memories and these words is an anxiety, a terrible and beautiful thing. Throughout these pages, these themes dwell between the poetic lyricism, and the raw feeling in these pieces. These poems are brambles. These poems are knives.

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for Emily. for my parents. for the dead birds, the dead buffalo, the
dead wolves, and all the dead people.

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Prehistory – **Gordon Square Review**

Bramble and Knife – **Sonora Review**

I Thought There Would Be More Wolves – **Hunger Mountain**

Your Daughter is a Liar – **Prairie Schooner**

Sending a Book to a Boy, For a Moment, A Girl Sings Into a Well – **Sequestrum**

Renovation – **Third Point Press**

Bad Hunter, I Will Have Forgotten You By Sunday – **Fairy Tale Review**

A Man Tells Me How Difficult My Body Is, Pantoum for Dark Lands – **Tinderbox Poetry Journal**

Knives Before Forks – **New South Journal**

Stopping Time – **Third Coast**

Gifts from Birds - **Rust + Moth**

Of Men and Birds – **Blueshift Journal**

The Farm – **Moonsick Magazine**

Fieldborn – **Sugared Water**

Mud Ceremony – **Molotov Cocktail**

The Farm – **Moonsick Magazine**

Woolly Bones – **Storm Cellar**

Phaedras de Blondel – **Crab Fat Magazine**

Blossom Rot, Scrape – **Reservoir Journal**

Favor, Making a Meal – **The Boiler Journal**

This History of Lungs, Phedras de Blondel – **Crab Fat Magazine**

Self Portrait As/With Sister, Loving With Scissors – **Wildness**

A Compulsion of Letters – **Yemassee**

Some of these poems have also appeared (in various stages) in the chapbook *Never Leave the Foot of an Animal Unskinned*, to be published by **Porkbelly Press**.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Preface

I am a collector. I gather objects in drawers, boxes, and small, self-contained shells. I write these collections. I write them into space, out of the basement, beyond the grave. This work engages the objects and cultural phenomena that surround death and grief—the anxiety of loss in the collecting of things, memories and people. In this thesis, I involve identity, liminal spaces, hybridity, and the themes of loss and extinction. A large part of this thesis hinges upon the material study of taxidermy and how the practice, or art, of animal body preservation shapes what Rachel Poliquin, a writer and curator, describes as a “culture of longing” (Poliquin).

For a project during a material culture theory class, I stumbled upon a book in NMU’s library entitled *Taxidermy and Zoological Collecting*, by William Temple Hornaday. The book was old, and had not been checked out of the library since 1992. It was originally published in 1894. This book, I must have thought, had nothing to do with poetry. It turned out, however, that this text, with its directions and diagrams and instructions on how to treat “the skins of small mammals”, or how to “collect fishes” would become the heart of my project that semester. Then, it became so much more. It became the tangible inspiration for my thesis—in it, I found fascination and terror, I found the men, the male gaze, my family, and of course, the animals: alive and dead, in me, or hung on the wall, displayed in the museum.

Writing a thesis is strange in this way. What was a book held together with yellowing tape became the driving force of this thesis. As I sift through these poems, I recognize and relive the moments that churned forth the words. The snippets of this book that shook me to my core. These poems span the entirety of my MFA. Some were written during my first workshop at Northern

Michigan University. Some were written mere weeks ago. Throughout my time writing this thesis, I've encompassed and interrogated many related themes in my writing. I kept returning to them. I needed them. I hope that, in this book, I create a new mythos. A mythos that is me. The main challenge in the writing of this thesis was not in the writing of the poems, but in the finding, identifying and naming of the thing as a whole, addressing the strangeness of the animals, the unknown and well-traveled subjects and objects.

In between these themes, I reveal and interrogate liminality, a shuffling between worlds and the shadows of extinction, death, family, feminism, and the presence of the animal. These themes swim between the poems. The poems in this book encompass all of these themes, both singularly and in multiplicity. In this introduction, I will address each of these themes, and will hopefully construct a map of this book.

I have titled this book *Bramble and Knife*, and it is a collection of exactly that. In this manuscript, I collect the brambles, the thickets, the difficult and necessary darknesses; I clear them with a knife. I stab them through and through. Grief, death, loss, recovery, and recreation dwell in the soft spaces of this manuscript. The poems in this book are the skeleton; they are strong and unflinching. They clack and bruise and make loud sounds. But in between the lines, in the warm places where the blood hides, this is where the brambles dwell. The brambles, dense with thorn, pool around each word, each little animal in the text.

Family, Memory, and the Leaving Behind

In the summer of 2017, I received an Excellence in Education grant that allowed me to travel to the many places that my family has lived in, lost, and left. On this trip, I explored this theme of extinction and its various forms. In my grant proposal, I wrote about the various themes that occur throughout my work:

Throughout my time in the MFA, my work has engaged with morbidity, hybridity and the enchanted undertones of reality. I have been drawing upon animalistic, mystical and monstrous images found in folklore and fairytales from various culturally historical texts.

Braided into these images are themes of family, loneliness, loss, female identity, fantasy and survival (Ryan).

While many of these themes are quantifiable and researchable, I believed that the themes of loneliness, loss and survival needed to be explored again where they had originated. This trip was in pursuit of those memories. Memories that were not only my own, but were collective, familial, historic memories that were buried and hidden throughout the Midwest. My family was, and is, good at hiding pain.

In the poem, “Mapping My Father”, I visit Michigan City, Indiana, where my father spent a lot of his childhood. It is a strange place, and it became even stranger as I drove through the town, on the phone with my father, as he directed me, from memory, to his mother’s grave. To the house that his grandmother owned. The storage facility next door, now covered in vines and rust. In this poem, I name my father’s pain directly. He refuses to do this himself. I visit his mother’s grave, and it is engraved with my own name. I am named after my grandmother, but she died in her sleep before I was born. This poem touches upon the strangeness of seeing a grave with my name on it. I wonder about my own mortality in this poem, as well as my father’s. I imagine his body buried next to his mother’s. In Michigan City, I drive to the lake, where the earth splits apart into blue. I drive to the prison that my father and his cousins used to play beside. In the poem, I write “the truth doesn’t always hurt—sometimes the town is/ just the town” (57). I do not know this place, and I never will, but I know something there, and I feel the pain in the green siding on my great-grandmother’s old house. Maybe this is a genetic memory—something passed down through blood.

I address this familial theme of extinction through other poems as well. In “Raw Honey”, as well as the poems “Self Portrait As/With Sister”, and “My Sister Shops for Caskets at Costco”, I come to terms with my sister’s struggle with heroin addiction, and our constantly shifting relationship in the aftermath. In “Raw Honey”, I compare the Antelope Valley Poppy Reserve in California to the poppies that produce opium—the heroin in my sister’s blood. I admit, “it’s not the same. i know. but the opium poppy looks/ just as much like blood” (68). In this poem, I come to terms with my sister’s addiction, but also force myself to confront the beauty of the flower that became, so quickly, a poison burrowing its way through my family. My sister, now, is obsessed with death, having seen so much of it, and having had so many friends die. In “Self Portrait As/With Sister”, I talk of our mutual navigations of her life post-addiction, and how our relationship shifts and changes as we move further away from the pain:

I notice that her shoes

are covered in mud. I have the same pair. shined.

gleaming. when I visit her, I always do her dishes.

clean out her car. I find an old pickle. dog toys.

an uneaten black apple (72).

In the poem, I wrestle with my desire to “fix” my sister. To clean her house, her car, her shoes. I interrogate my reactions to her impulses, my need to “fix” her, as though she is broken. As the poem moves forward, I try to remind myself that her impulses are not harmful; they are not heroin. At the end of the poem, I write of our phone calls, and how she ends every phone call, even the 5 minute ones, with “I love you”. I know that this is because, once, she almost died and she hadn’t

held those words in her mouth. She knows that her addiction hides in her skin, that any day, it could come back, rearing its ugly head:

on the shortest phone calls, she says

I love you. and I say I love you, too. we both

know why. this is our way. our forced, grinning

photograph. our aching pattern of blood (73).

In “My Sister Shops for Caskets at Costco”, I rewrite a dinner table conversation in which my sister expresses her interest in going to school for social work and grief counseling. She wants to help people through their own dying, and through the deaths of their loved ones. In this conversation, my sister seems to be searching for my parents’ death wishes. She wants to know what they want to happen to their bodies when they die, but my parents will not speak of their deaths. This silence hangs in the air between all of us, and I can feel its heaviness (23). My family, in this poem is shaped by death, and it is our obsession.

Extinction appears in other familial moments throughout this manuscript. In “Somewhere Inbetween”, I catalogue my family’s first meals in our then new home in Michigan. We have left our previous lives behind, and maybe our futures can be seen in the gleam of the new kitchen, in the shining, stainless oven (64). In “This History of Lungs”, and “Making a Meal”, I interrogate my relationship with my mother. It is a very different relationship than the one between my father and I, but it is not one without love. In the poems, I notice my body, my knuckles, my skin, becoming more and more like my mother’s (69 & 67). In these poems, I struggle with this inheritance.

This thread buries itself within me. It is the deepest, and sometimes most difficult, but it is the thread that began this manuscript. The poem “Favor” was one of the first poems that I wrote in

graduate school. It has followed me to the end. It has carried me through. This manuscript began with my family, and encircled around that thrumming, pulsing center. These poems led me to the animal, and created another border, and another hybridity, within the manuscript. In “Favor”, I write:

I am not a patient child,
or a curator of pain , so I become
a young bird,
underneath (66).

In this manuscript’s deeply buried thread of “family”, a bird was born.

The Animal in Me. The Animal in Us.

In addition to familial extinction, and extinction through death, through leaving a place that once was a home, I address literal extinction in this manuscript. Of species, of animals, of earth. My poems have always had a layer of the animal in them. They have teeth, fur and blood. In his essay "Some Notes on the Gazer Within," Larry Levis says that:

...[a]nimals are objects of contemplation, but they are also, unlike us, without speech, without language, except in their own instinctual systems. When animals occur in poems, then, I believe they are often emblems for the muteness of the poet, for what he or she cannot express, for what is deepest and sometimes most antisocial in the poet’s nature. The other thing that occurs infallibly when the poet places the animal in the world, or in the world of the poem, is the recovery of the landscape. It is no longer a world without imagination, or the world of tract housing beyond time (Levis).

Levis claims, later in this essay, “poets thirst after what is pure and other and inhuman in the animal” (Levis). I find myself doing this in my own work: thirsting for some creature outside of myself, outside of my own female body. A body that, sometimes, is difficult to write about.

In some of my poems, the human becomes the animal. For example, in the poems “Beast Fables”, “Of Men and Birds”, “Stopping Time” and “Gifts from Birds”, the speaker wrestles with the sameness and the difference between the animal and the human form. In “Gifts from Birds” the speaker transforms into a bird when death, a memory, is confronted:

when the bread is driest, the hunger the neediest—
the remembering is a stiff arm of grace, the face that preens

me gold. my feathers become small mirrors, my chest:
a fruit ripened black (16).

Maybe this representation of the animal, as something that gets close and intimate with the human body is, in some ways, a representation of the muteness the speaker feels. Maybe that animal is a shadow—the landscape of a reality in which the body is primal, has autonomy and control, and exists “beyond time” (Levis).

In the poem, “Beast Fables”, I write in pursuit of this relationship again, even more brazenly. This poem, though, interrogates the violence encountered by the animal body, and how that violence changes between skin and fur, between animal and human. The speaker in this poem argues with the idea of the fable, the idea of the storybook animal: an animal body entirely void of violence, entirely void of blood. Even in these fairytales, these tea parties, the speaker sees the blood—the violence that lies underneath:

maybe you become the rabbit,

and then here we are again.

brute and human. shaved,
but still, waking up with hair
in our teeth (29).

These poems were born out of a material culture study of taxidermy, and the strange materiality of animal death and preservation. Humans, as we view ourselves, are superior to animals. In reality, we are animal; we are skin and bones and fur and we prey on our food. What separates us from animals is our engagement with objects and material. What separates people from things is their human-ness or non-human-ness. Without things being things, we are just as much human as we are animal, so how can we make the distinction between animal and human? How is an animal a “thing”? In the poem, “The Field Museum”, I question the relationship between the human and the object, the object and the animal:

All of it looking the same and different
and breathless—the Egyptian exhibit and tombs

and the infant mummy and the miniature
dioramas of men putting organs into jars. All
smaller now, all looking like the same dead things (20).

In this poem, I navigate the idea that through making, humans make themselves—through the construction of museums, the posing of preserved animal bodies, the arrangement and presentations of objects, we are making ourselves. While visiting The Field Museum in Chicago with my father, I know myself, and I know him, and I know the strangeness of what surrounds me in that space.

Pat Morris, author of *A History of Taxidermy: Art, Science and Bad Taste*, agrees that this physical relationship with bone is how taxidermy is being born again. People have hidden from the animal for so long that “when someone picks up a bone or skull, they are completely knocked out by it, by what an incredible, wonderful thing it is” (Blitz). The same goes for a dead bird, fallen from a tree. The small body in your hand becomes something special, a connection with the feather. You are a witness to the death, and you preserve it. Rachel Poliquin describes taxidermy as being “still the animal but forever blurred with human desire” (Poliquin). It is not an interpretation. It is time, stopping. It is life, captured forever. Undying. Undead. There is longing in that, in the darkly unknowable. In being uninitiated. Fittingly, I have a poem in the manuscript called “Stopping Time”, and in this poem, I write:

nothing dies that doesn't need
to be dead. nothing is skinned that shouldn't be

turned inside out. when you hold a skull in your hand
it is suddenly more than bone. more than a maze

of holes and structure.

The skull of an animal, when held in my hand, becomes a fascination and a terror. It signifies violence, but it also signifies life, what was and what could have been. In some ways, it is a maze, but a maze of so much more than merely the bone.

In these poems that center around the animal, there is another layer, one that is “blurred with human desire”. Derrida, in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, identifies these borders, and writes: “I move from “the ends of man,” that is the confines of man, to “the crossing of borders” between man and animal. Crossing borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal—to the

animal in itself, to the animal in me and the animal at unease with itself” (Derrida 372). In this way, I am surrendering to the animal, to the animal in me. I think that women writers and poets, in particular, are keener to this animal. We see this in the writings of Marianne Moore, H.D., Alison Hawthorne Deming, Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Anne Sexton, Ada Limón, Anne Carson, and Sylvia Plath. I see this in myself as well. I write the animal body because it is the body I can control. I navigate the deaths of animals, the violences against them, and the preservation of their skins because in some way, I see my own body in that animal—in that wolf, that horse, that crow. I see my body in the animal that is subject to violence. This animal presence in my book is not quiet, and it leads to a discourse with the female body, my own body, and my own feminism, in a necessary and urgent way.

The Female Body and the Male Gaze

Many of the poems in this manuscript deal with my own body, and my own realization of its power, as well as its lack of power. In many of these poems, my body cowers against the male gaze, and I try to challenge that instinct in those pieces. In the poems, “A Man in a Bar Takes a Picture of Me”, “A Man Tells Me How Difficult My Body Is”, and “Girls I Am Mistaken For” the speaker engages in various conversations and interactions with men that make her feel small, unimportant, and unmemorable. These poems interrogate those moments; “A Man Tells Me How Difficult My Body Is” is one of the longer poems in the manuscript, and performs an erasure of itself as the poem continues. This idea of presenting a poem, and then erasing parts of it in the same space, as though parts of a body, was powerful to me, and I think it created an interesting visual dynamism on the page:

he tells me I am a nest of bees. a dust storm.

a dead owl. taking up so much space

with my skin and limbs. he must be

an enthusiast of the female body. he must

know the tightness of metal on my back...

...a nest of bees. dust storm.

owl. my skin—

an enthusiast.

metal (26).

In this poem, the animal appears again, but we also see the female body as a conquest, as a subject to be “enthused” about. In the poem “A Man in a Bar Takes a Picture of Me”, the speaker questions how power is exchanged when the picture is taken, and questions her own apparent submission to that power: “the cartoon snapshot sound his phone made. the flash he didn’t turn off./my eyes, alive, in a circle of light—above this man’s head, like/ he was my sun. like I was a moon, orbiting” (41). The male gaze isn’t hidden in these poems, but at the same time, the poems critique the male presence—they are unashamed in their address of it. In Hélène Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa”, she writes:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement (Cixous 875).

Though men appear in these poems, and their gaze and power exists within the text, they also are only referred to in relation to the female body. Ever romantic male presence in this manuscript could be the same man; they could all be the boy from Louisiana. Without the woman's body, the poem would not exist, and neither would the man. These poems are dictated by the female form, and by her movement alone. In Cixous' essay, she also writes of writing as being a reclaiming of the body:

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time (Cixous 880).

In these poems, where I may have censored myself before, I find myself writing about my own body, and the body of the speaker, even more explicitly. This, I believe, is a feminist act—I am reclaiming what has been “confiscated” from me, or from the speaker. In “Girls I am Mistaken For”, the speaker's name is taken from her, but she reclaims it:

i am not who you are looking for. i am being
reclassified—renamed as girl with brown hair

and no face. let's take the blindfold off. let's take off
these dumb masks. they keep my eyes empty.

they keep me in the dark. hidden from wolves
or men who say they don't want me. men who

forget my name. who can't spell my body right (36).

In this poem, the speaker rejects the masks that are given to her. She rejects the men who forget her name and her body. Throughout the poem, the speaker is named incorrectly, but in that incorrect naming, the speaker learns what she wants to be called.

In the long prose poem at the center of the book called "The Lizard that Lived Forever", the speaker also wrestles with the male gaze, and interrogates the struggle of yearning for companionship in the shadow of harassment, assault, and abuse from the men in her life:

when the man at the store tells me what he thinks of my body, I want
to tell him that I haven't been touched in three years. maybe I am
lying. maybe this is the struggle he speaks of.

*

I am a person who forgets to take out the trash. I am three dead flies
on a windowsill. my black cat carries a dead moth through the house
and I do nothing to stop it. I am friendly. I have learned how to make
people smile on command. I use words like watchmaker, stream,
blueberry, turtle. I twirl in circles. I giggle and it sounds like the
goddamn rain (49).

In the same breath, the speaker considers what the man says to her as truth, but then follows up that thought with truths of her own, listing them off without shame or embarrassment. Later in the poem, the speaker admits, "it is easier, of course, to pretend none of this is real" (51). It would be easier to not confront the reality of the female body, it would be easy to ignore the male gaze and leave it at that.

Conclusion

In Adrienne Rich's *When The Dead Awaken: "Writing as Re-Vision"*, she recognizes, in the writing of Plath and Diana Wakoski, "the myth-making tradition, the romantic tradition... what women and men have been to each other":

... in the work of both Man appears as, if not a dream, a fascination and a terror; and that the source of the fascination and the terror is, simply, Man's power-to dominate, tyrannize, choose, or reject the woman. The charisma of Man seems to come purely from his power over her and his control of the world by force, not from anything fertile or life-giving in him...it is finally the woman's sense of herself—embattled, possessed—that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will, and female energy" (Rich 19).

I think that, underneath all the themes in this manuscript, what ties the animals, the family, the memory, the body, and extinction together is this "woman's sense of herself—embattled, possessed" (Rich 19). Taxidermy, the violence against certain animals, the graves of family members, the female body; all of these are a "fascination and a terror" (Rich 19).

I am a collector, and this is a collection that I have gathered around me for three years. It has breath, it has blood, it has bones. It is my second sister. It is my blood memory. I think that, in this collection, I have interrogated the terrors and fascinations in my poetry, the various themes that shape and mold them into myth, into my body, into me, and my constantly shifting narrative.

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GIFTS FROM BIRDS

when I feed the crows, they bring me marbles.
they bring the rusted hinges of doors, pieces of foam,

bits of bone from dead mice. the rotting claw of a crab,
a screw, a broken light bulb. a crow never forgets

a face—they bring the gifts directly to my mouth, straight
to the tip of my nose.

I know when I'm being watched. I know when someone
close to me has died—I can feel it in my blood before

the phone bleats death. crows, too, know
of this remembering hurt, the face that threw the stones.

when the bread is driest, the hunger the neediest—
the remembering is a stiff arm of grace, the face that preens

me gold. my feathers become small mirrors, my chest:
a fruit ripened black. I remember this face—I bring stones

beat soft by water, beads made of ink and glass, a button,
a bolt, a paperclip.

I.

KNIVES BEFORE FORKS

My thumb is a dagger
and a spoon – carrying
a clip of apple to my teeth

My father gives me a set of knives
for my birthday and in this moment,
I am the wooden block—
I am the dark recesses into which
the knife slides deeper.

The handles are heavy and black
and my knuckles fit around them
like round stones slung together
with leather.

When I was young, my bones
were not strong enough to push
through meat. They flexed against
the knives and forks until
the plate chipped into blue.

My father cut the ribeye, red
with blood and gristle,
into manageable tragedies.

My fingers curled around forks
but did not know the name for tongue.

I am still trying to learn
to be wholly metal. To carry
eggs without them tumbling
from the spoon.

PREHISTORY

I wanted to be an archaeologist
until my mother told me my office

would be in the basement of a museum
and my lungs would fill with dust.

Still, I learned the names of dinosaurs
and identified the difference between

a shoulder blade and a pelvis in middle
school science. I dug into the fetal pig's

cold belly while a boy pulled my hair.
I bleached the skull of a mouse that I found

in the woods. I remember when I found a dead
spider perched on its head like a crown. When

I promised my mother I wouldn't dig up bones
for a living, I only meant in deserts and far away

forests. I only meant to not dig up what others
bothered burying. I only meant the bones

that didn't belong to me.

THE FIELD MUSEUM

I remember the bones bigger. I remember
the echo and the pillars.
Sue is skinned and her head is heavy.

In the Terracotta Warrior exhibit,
the stable boy guards a room
of dead birds. Even the horses

in their bone and leather. My father studies
a map and closes his blind eye.
His leather jacket a crown of blood.

My tattoos lifting away from my skin
like fickle monarchs—something
I have disremembered. In the basement,

I am shrunk to the size of a penny.
A mechanical spider shudders and breaks
the neck of an ant. This: disremembered, too.

I pace around the carved out shells of cicadas.
All of it looking the same and different
and breathless—the Egyptian exhibit and tombs

and the infant mummy and the miniature
dioramas of men putting organs into jars. All
smaller now, all looking like the same dead things,

my father in another leather jacket and me still
small as a penny. The charging lions
by the vending machines, in all their slick bronze,

in all their movement and muscle and tension,
still speared down. Still dead. Still gone.

BAD HUNTER

at the Taxidermy World Championships in Missouri,
women flock around like smart pink birds. they comb

their small foxes with toothbrushes, and preen the wings
of swallows. men wearing leaves chew on toothpicks.

women with sharp bangs and blue glasses pull at the lips
of whitetail deer. one paints the tongue of a rat a sweet

blushy rose. the mounted heads of bucks are lined in neat
rows like an army. the judges wear thin glasses and flash bright

little lights. this is how wet the nose should be, this is how
cocked the hoof. a girl dusts paint flecks off of her road-kill

beaver. a boy licks a pearl of blood from his thumb.

RENOVATION

this time, we say *rally, rally win*. we condition the leather until supple. we talk about the men we have lost as if they had never been anything but lucky to touch us. it's like this: the orange peels gone limp in the yard. the glasses, old and sticky in the sink. the wallpaper peeling like a snake. good grief, the guns in the closet are dusty and bullet-less. good grief, the inside is made of oil and liquor. when the chalkboard turns into a dark swarm of wasps, I have forgotten how my name denies my body like water and butter. the beads of yellow lifting to the surface like small, stubborn suns.

MY SISTER SHOPS FOR CASKETS AT COSTCO

my parents, i'm sure, think this is my fault. talking like i do,
with grief in my mouth. all those bones clicking against my teeth.

my sister builds a pine box in her bedroom, and every night,
its walls become more intricate. gilded with fur and red lipstick.

she talks of pollution. embalming fluid coats her tongue. my mother
is heavy with regret. her own parents sealed and swallowed up.

my father lights his parents on fire. i can feel the flame licking at
my knees. the tip of my head. in her voice, i can hear the questions

my sister won't ask. that my parents won't answer. she wants
them to say: burn me, burn me. throw me into a river. make me

ash. make me a memory. drop poppies at my feet.

IN PRAISE OF THE EXOSKELETON

the ability to stay entirely untouched.
unscavenged. unhaunted by the other

bodies inside your own. once, pavement,
split me right down the middle. I learned

my blood and its spread. the lengths
my skin went to in its healing. the way I lost

and lost and came back—bright. pink. new.
when men tell me what to think of my body,

I pull my bones around me like a slick jacket
of white. harder this way. rigid and resistant.

ready for rocks. there are mechanics to this
method. to becoming a shell and staying soft

underneath. there's failure, too. in the scales
I develop in direct sunlight. in the cracks

that let the light in. the superglue that won't hold
me. the doctor told me I will never grow taller

and I said, that's fine, people always see me
as taller than I am. I am elastic energy.

when you're not looking, I am a swarm of locusts.
when you touch me, it sounds like thunder.

GLASS GRAVITY

i didn't ask you to open your mouth like that i didn't ask
for your body to turn towards me like a sundial your eyes small

and ticking clocks i haven't thought about that penny i found
on the ground for weeks it has been sitting in my pocket

going unspent cast in bronze

in this scene, i am in love or asleep all summer naked
waiting for any butcher to have at my body in its steam and sweat and salt

its rich and unthankful blood i often see my face in the slick
of gasoline on the road in the concrete

birdbath split down the middle
what delicious gravity what a waste to have never

felt clean

A MAN TELLS ME HOW DIFFICULT MY BODY IS

to look at. to stitch and pull into
all the beautiful shapes he can imagine.

he tells me I am a nest of bees. a dust storm.
a dead owl. taking up so much space

with my skin and limbs. he must be
an enthusiast of the female body. he must

know the tightness of metal on my back.
he breathes near me and says *what a struggle*

your body must be and his words are liquid steel.
slippery as beetles. the bluffs on the north edge

of the town are black and jagged. the walleye
swarm in the deep clear water. this is the biggest

lake. the largest sea of ice. it is an excellent
customer of space. of taking ships and people

and trees and roads and swallowing them whole.
I want to tell the man than no one has touched me

for three years. maybe this is a lie. maybe this is
the struggle he speaks of. maybe he looks at my neck

like lake superior looks at boats made of wood
and men. I know I am obvious. I know I am not

small or easy to throw from a dock.
to look at.

the shapes. imagine

a nest of bees. dust storm.
owl. my skin—
an enthusiast.

metal.
a beetle, struggling.
liquid and

jagged. a
swarm of space
and water.

swallowed whole.
no one.
a lie. a struggle,
again. my neck,
obvious.

I am not
easy.

MIRROR UNIVERSE

and in it, the déjà vu is deafening. the unforgivable
mistakes, nearly forgotten. what's best for us becomes

a collection of sin. a musk of sweet gasoline.
the universe, never-ending. unbuttoned into ribbons

of black silk. the big bang makes no sound—the stars
not constant in state or time. flickering their tongues

in yellow flurries of light.
how would things have gone differently, had the black

cat next door not died. had I waited a year to leave. had
the glass not shattered on the kitchen floor. had my sister

not taken the pink pills in handfuls—
at once, alive and dead. holding the full glass and dropping

it on the linoleum. waiting with the trees and packing bags
in the same blue moment. swallowing the drugs and shuffling

them back into the bottle.

BEAST FABLES

we are all animals here—
the wily foxes on two legs, eating
at the dinner table. the crying
wolf's tail caught in the mower.

the tiger in your sister's volleyball
jersey becomes a flurry of blood, and here
is proximity. the animal in all
our skins. behind the glass—
in the gutters.

this is a lesson in fake dead
and real dead. in learning
all the lies. six cats mourning
the death of their brother.

you have a tea party in fur
and feathers. this is the storybook:
seeing your body turn to dust
in the glimmer of mirrors.

in his honest, twitching face, you
see what the rabbit really wants.
maybe you become the rabbit,
and then here we are again.

brute and human. shaved,
but still, waking up with hair
in our teeth.

THE MACKINAC FOX

I saw the fox after I crossed the bridge. a dead bird
filled her mouth; a bloody dinner. an argument of feathers.
it was, for that second, a comforting violence. a red streak
that knew the food chain and its unbreakable bones. how
easy the crow died: a simple organization of road and wood
and sky. say I outran the rain that day. say the sun set 4 times,
one after the other in a thunder of blue. it's true, driving for hours
is a strange chorus with the wind. a pact made between radio
static and the trees. at the gas station, I pull an entire butterfly
from the grill of my car. just a week ago, my body groaned
through a winter. the butterfly's wings came to a grinding halt.
the truth is, I am not that strong.

THE VOLUME OF A HUMAN HEART

when he pulls the bullet out of the deer's heart,
he laughs and licks the blood from his thumb.

he spits sunflower seeds out of his pink, wet mouth.
he tells me that lightning never strikes twice, and I believe

him. even when the silver lightning takes what I believe
and splinters a willow tree. all his trophies, still hot and burning.

the boy puts the bullet in his mouth just to taste the blood
again. he is a spitting image of brick. of buildings that are 100

years old. I believe everything he says because of this.
the good ol' boy drinks the beer I bought for myself

and coughs up a black and clacking beetle. and how much
blood in the heart? what is the volume of something like that?

32 bones in my mouth, chipping and shaking and grinding
to dust in the night. the three hearts of the octopus beat

in synchronicity. all my little lies, maybe the good 'ol boy takes
them in his arms, maybe he kills them, too. who are we to understand

the depth of the pit that we dig for grace? the blue whale
has a 950 pound heart—the size of a car. who are we to understand

any of this? sometimes, the boy takes my heart in his hands.
it sits there, making a mess in his palms. sometimes, the boy

puts it back. sometimes he puts it in his mouth and says
this is how much you love me.

STOPPING TIME

if you want to see God, peel back the skin of a
mouse's tail. see the small bones clicking their way

up in steps of pearl. nothing dies that doesn't need
to be dead. nothing is skinned that shouldn't be

turned inside out. when you hold a skull in your hand
it is suddenly more than bone. more than a maze

of holes and structure. when you are elbow deep
in fur, the bird becomes a small piece of emerald,

the beetle a blue opal. a trophy of blood or a recreation
of wind and wings broken back. there is a pot in the kitchen

labeled "for bones only", and it is a metal burnt black.
the skeletons are replaced with wooden dowels and wire.

in this rehydration of skin, you cheat death like it was just
a mess left on stained concrete. but there is your wall,

full of these dry dead things. all preened. all shined.
all waiting. like smart little crowns.

OF MEN & BIRDS

thrust your hook into his pelvis
and suspend him in midair. this
is so you can work with both
hands.

be gentle with his neck. give his legs
a coat of arsenical soap—it protects
him from insects. disjoint his bones carefully.

fill him up. with cotton,
dry leaves, grass, or
crumpled paper. wood wool
is driest and best.

when you take him home
notice his body: like a great
downy pillow. his bill
as long as a fence rail.

and what wings! and such feet!
you have never seen such a bird,
not even in your dreams.

in your dreams, he is an old,
rusty, second-hand crow. he
is some good genius.

a thimbleful of arsenic. a pair
of eyes black as ink.

when you stitch him up
make sure to treat him like
a lucky bird, not a greasy swan.

he should have a few stitches
at his back, but not too many.
for obvious reasons.

you wouldn't want him
to look a fool.

13 HORSES IN MICHIGAN

the flames had taken the barn. the smoke inside was a dense
curtain of black. this bad dream curled away from the night

like a lit candle. the thirteen horses, in minutes, stifled in ash.
asleep in the windowless stable. this, in the ugly yawn of spring,

is a funeral for the bitter greens. the sweet and undisturbed hay.
the long necks of the beasts gone empty and still. Elwood,

and his muzzle of velvet. Roxy, in her dappled grey coat. the shined
and scraped clean hooves of Romeo. his brassy stomps in the corral.

Razz and Hero. Fiona and her teeth like milk glass. the suspicious
fire in all their beginnings and endings. a horse's lungs are ten times

bigger than mine. they breathe in gallons of air every second. the horse
is a prey animal. it is always wondering if it is safe.

I WILL HAVE FORGOTTEN YOU BY SUNDAY

UFC fighting plays on the TV in the bar—
men, with ground up teeth, smile through
blood and do backflips from fences.

the referee takes the hand of the winner
and raises it into the dense black of the
arena. his arm is stained red by the gold

lights of the ring. I am the broken bone.
I am the shiny yellow belt around the man's
slick waist. I am the girl that smells like clove

and wet brass. I am the dumb dove flickering
in the chain-link cage. when you give me your
name in the bar, I will have forgotten you

before the bell clangs. before the man's hand
bounces from the blue mat like a T-bone
steak. this is not to say I am forgetful.

this is not to say you are unimportant.
this is to say I am busy fighting and winning
and losing and keeping my teeth in my mouth.

GIRLS I AM MISTAKEN FOR

in the coffee shop: dakota, marlow, girl
waiting for someone she met online. girls

with more interesting names than mine. more
syllables. more time on the tongue. no, I'm sorry

i am not who you are looking for. i am being
reclassified—renamed as girl with brown hair

and no face. let's take the blindfold off. let's take off
these dumb masks. they keep my eyes empty.

they keep me in the dark. hidden from wolves
or men who say they don't want me. men who

forget my name. who can't spell my body right.
who undo my letters like small, slippery buttons.

*

at the front desk of the hotel, i wear pearls and
a blue dress shirt. i am every other girl behind

that desk. i have been working for days with no breaks.
i am that same girl and the next. and the next.

and the next.

BRAMBLE AND KNIFE

never mind the string of lights that died before all the others.
never mind the last white wolf in Yellowstone limping, red,

through the dense night. no one can ever tell me this is fate,
how everything goes about dying like it does. how the goat's eyes

flicker in sweet quadrilaterals before the knife chomps its teeth
metallic. when a boy jumps from a bridge in my hometown, his face

looks like my young grandfather, or my never-born brother. my sister
skips another funeral of a friend gone missing. she polishes

the glasses in her sink until her skin glares red. listen: I am drawing
diagrams of the frostbitten grass. of the small, untouched bodies

of birds. in some other life, I am breathing and my heart does not
skip in my throat like a river-worn stone.

II.

SCRAPE

Before I knew love,
I lost 32 pieces of me—
a catalog of blood
and quarters.

My jaw had divorced itself,
my teeth spun in
tessellations.

I let my incisors swing,
played them like chimes
over the bathroom sink,

before my father clutched
my chin and clawed
them from my mouth.

This was the first time
a man took something
of mine as his own.

I never learned to keep myself
as myself.

Once, my dentist scraped too hard
and a tooth sprung
from my mouth like a penny.
They caged my teeth like clumsy wings.

When I swallowed a tooth,
I dreamt that it was burrowing
inside me—becoming an extension
of bone.

Now, I dream that my teeth
crumble away like dry bread,
fall from my mouth like dead birds.

SAY IT NEVER HAPPENED

I was a dead end. a girl who stood up
and ran. but what did I know. now, I am a girl
who is being born. I fell through a hole
in the earth and ended up in your bedroom.
brushed basalt from my neck. the red dawn
turning every man with a rough shaven face
into you. into a body that I remember naming
white ceiling. devil-bird. you fresh adventure.
me, on the sea floor gathering coral. pieces
of plastic boats. let me fill up until I am
all water. or full of crackling leaves. in between
the Beethoven, your throat of milk, your body
inside mine like some fire-breathing chimera.
forget this: when I wore white and chased steel
down the street. when I wore white and you
called me a bride. my cruel tongue and you
switching bodies like a ghost. but what do
I know. I am kissing all the tigers and naming
them after what never mattered.

A MAN IN A BAR TAKES A PICTURE OF ME

without my permission. it's because I'm reading a book and this,
he decides, is not enough fun. I should, by all intents and purposes,

be having more fun. so he poses for a selfie. his phone cocked
in my direction. I know what he is doing. my knuckles are white.

I hold the book like a slingshot and a rock. this is something new:
I say nothing. I glimpse the picture on the man's phone and in it,

I am staring right into the lens. he is not bothered. he laughs. I glow
in the orange light of the bar. I cannot forget his hand. his thick

fingers and how he just assumed they owned me. this is the lesson:
my body turns to chalk. my skin forgets its smooth, dripping shape

like wax. the next day, ice coats my car in a hardness that scrapes my palms.
when I say forget, I really mean I remember every moment about that night.

the cartoon snapshot sound his phone made. the flash he didn't turn off.
my eyes, alive, in a circle of light—above this man's head, like

he was my sun. like I was a moon, orbiting.

A GIRL SINGS INTO A WELL

it is deep and gaping.
 of course,
 her voice echoes like a bell.

of course,
her lips are humming sticks.

her song is a leather bucket carrying the water.

 of course,
 I am afraid of her. of the way

she opens her throat like a thirsty orchid—

she is an inevitable girl
in seven aching ways.

her body arched over the lip
of the well—

 its mortared stones digging
 into her, a familiar mutation of breath.

sometimes I am the girl, pushing sounds
 from my neck until I feel solid again. clacking

rebar against the rock.

a bird ricochets against
the tunnel underneath a city.

 of course, I am afraid
 that when I wake up I will not remember.

more afraid, of course,
 that the remembering

becomes my voice.

lifting from my mouth
 like a wet
 and sorry moth.

LITTLE MONSTER

I wake and think about my grave, then leave
my bed. but look how blue my skin's become.
this hue a mystery. the boy, he touched
me once. my skin—it turned a deeper blue.
my hair, it shone like light and stood on end.
I do not think that this is love—it's dumb.

I once forgot my name (my throat was dumb)
but now it flies above my head until I leave
it crumbs outside my door. my mother ends
the dinner early. under my bed, my name becomes
a little monster. four flickering blue
and inky wings. her teeth like knives. she touched

my cat—he turned to smoke. but when she touched
my skin, I didn't vanish—my mouth was dumb
again. she took my voice away. the blue,
it comes across my lips: my blood, it leaves
my body. blood was the boy. boy becomes
the worst of me and names the monster. the end

is only starting after death—what ends
must start some twisted way. like this, or touched
beneath the morning. rusty, old, becomes
a tired and boring sun. the dawn is dumb,
my monster crawls beneath, and then she leaves
and takes my name. my skin, it stretched the blue

away. the pink returns. this time, the blue
is something missing: day will never end.
the boy is touching me across the room. I leave
his face and him alone. I want the touch
of blue again. I think I'm sounding dumb
but which is up or down again? The night becomes

the black again. again again becomes
my skin, but pink but want but blue
again again. she's back. like blood or dumb
or tongue. the little monster wants to end
the way my bones are shaking, touched and touched
again by boy or blue or monster—leave,

untouched (or blank) my body aches to end,
is leaving at edge of bed. the sun becomes

a blue and yellow dress—my body: dumb.

EXTINCT

the eyewitness book
invertebrates and
the mummified frog.
banded flint. problematica—
in a series of bone. amber
years, I am thankful to be
circumstance of
a man I do not know.
tasted under my tongue.
of a nail. the sweet breath
please, I need you to be
growth and height. the
redwoods and the
gold of an oil slick.
on the beach of a desert.

of fossils and the lost skeleton
spine and the footprint of
the horse tooth.
what cannot be classified
and soft sediment. most
seen. the favorable
disappearance. memory is
not a soft soil I have
today, it is the pounding
of a bat. a hummingbird.
conifer wood. ringlets of
fossilized sequoia and all the
dawn. at once. be the black
be a bone museum
be eating the sun.

PANTOUM FOR DARK LANDS

after Aase Berg

it is my fear that tears apart the place.
apart the strange, apart the fat rose
in its muddy bed. tears the cave in two.
a wild hare bleats until its neck bleeds.

apart the strange, apart the fat rose
unraveling its petals into glass. this:
a wild hare bleats until its neck bleeds.
a catastrophe that has already happened—

unraveling its petals into glass. this:
avoid it. bring it back and dissect it,
the catastrophe that has already happened,
where I forget all the dead animals.

avoid it. bring it back and dissect it—
it is my fear that tears apart the place,
where I forget all the dead animals
in their muddy beds. tear the cave in two.

YOUR DAUGHTER IS A LIAR

she never repainted the bedroom. she said the steak was well-seasoned. she brushed out the braids you made and said it was the rain.

what a waste to have collected her trophies. what a waste to have fed the lizard translucent crickets until it died. what a waste to have groomed

the horses until they gleamed. on the bathroom floor, her nose bleeds until it is dark and dried. until her eyes are smooth, grey stones. when

does she finish feeling like a fortune. when does she learn to crack the eggs into the bowl without shell. when does she stop walking by

the church like a silly angel in white. and now, she has managed to sleep without forgetting to open the window. without swallowing the spiders

in her mouth. don't worry, this is not how she goes. not easy, not in the night. not without spilling her name like milk.

THE LIZARD THAT LIVED FOREVER

I know the bodies of water here, the beasts that surround them in dark, cloud-like flurries. I also know that I do not believe in God.

*

I hate to say that I dream about men, but I do. about men who have gone off and married other girls. moved to other colonial houses in Virginia. it is like strapping the tree branch to my bicycle and riding until I become concrete.

*

do not fall. do not grab for the largest branches. I did not believe it was a bald eagle until I saw it's neck in a flash of white. its mouth yellow and sharp like a sun. it stretched from the evergreen like a torch, like a cloud lit aflame.

*

when the apple fell out of my mouth, I cried until I couldn't cry anymore. but it was good. the apple was sweet and grainy. I was laughing. the apple fell at my feet and fizzed and rolled. Monday drew a circle around me and lit it on fire. Wednesday learned my name and spit it onto my lap.

*

I scrub an opal earring with a wire brush and it turns to gold in my hands. I have dug it out of a dead woman's pink jewelry

box. I was born in October, and I feel like I need to polish all of the opals that ever existed.

*

this morning, a man walks into the store where I work and tells me he is an ordained minister; he doesn't say anything about my body this time. he asks to see an antique straight razor and cradles the carved handle in his hands like a small bird.

*

the truth is, my sister will not feed the pet lizard so the crickets jump around our house like small flickers of light. they sing to each other. the lizard jumps from our palms as though she has never been afraid. when she dies, she curls under a rock and turns to dust. we bury her in the backyard as though we loved her.

*

when the man at the store tells me what he thinks of my body, I want to tell him that I haven't been touched in three years. maybe I am lying. maybe this is the struggle he speaks of.

*

I am a person who forgets to take out the trash. I am three dead flies on a windowsill. my black cat carries a dead moth through the house and I do nothing to stop it. I am friendly. I have learned how to make people smile on command. I use words like watchmaker, stream, blueberry, turtle. I twirl in circles. I giggle and it sounds like the goddamn rain.

*

I think about my sister's lizard. how I named her Bippy or Zippy or Dippy or Lippy. I think about how she lived longer than all the other lizards. I think about the strange scars left behind on my body; their pale and vicious takeover. the part I do remember: applying medicine every night, peeling off the scab in the morning, and doing it all over again. and again.

*

I see the man again. and this time, I shrink into a hummingbird. I polish the glass and nod my head. I try to laugh at his jokes and show my teeth. what he doesn't know is that I feel all the poison. I smell it on his skin. on his scabby arms. his combat boots are laced tight and tall as though they have never left his feet.

*

maybe a stranger is someone I have never met. maybe he takes a picture of me without my permission. maybe he is 5 beers deep and reeks of smoke. maybe a stranger owns my body, in some sick and unfair way. he knows what will make me move down the bar. he knows what will make me shift in my seat until my dress becomes a chrysalis.

*

this is to say: I have never forgiven myself for the times I smiled when I should have screamed. for the men who asked when they knew the answer. the last time I saw you, I ran through the parking lot like a deer caught in the line of fire. of course, I could just take the blindfold off. of course, I could just let you shoot me and it'd all be over.

*

the last time you saw me, my foot was broken and I was bleating like a doe. I shut my mouth and favored every other bone in my body.

*

before my trust became buried in the sea. before I picked up all the road kill and called it my own. before I learned that faith has nothing to do with love. before the overgrown lawn. before the man. before all the men. before I ate a fig for the first time and it felt like a universe found its way into my mouth. I never knew survival like that. how to say thank you but with needles in your teeth.

*

but are you sure? in the end, everything turns to dust. just like the lizard. just like the rusty and worn down razorblade. we have all known too many cheeks. we have all known too many men who will tell us what they think without caring at all.

*

it is easier, of course, to pretend none of this is real. that the rained-on, mustard-yellow couch sinking into the grass will be sat on again, someday, somehow, in a dry and well-lived-in home that creaks with mahogany. that someday, I will make someone laugh and it will not be with my mouth feeling so far away from my body.

*

I will never forget what you said to me when you left: you begged me to stop speaking. you begged me to stop saying your name.

THE LAMB WITHOUT A MOTHER

when my mother's water broke in a McDonald's
I was ready but I also was not. the doctor

pulled me by my shoulders until my collarbone snapped. until
I broke out of my mother in a messy splinter of bone.

in the artificial womb, the pink lamb shudders. the womb
is named eve. let's name the lamb "breath" or "baby"—

her hooves already sharp and black. her eyes closed.
moving beneath the lids. her ears flickering in the fluid.

the plastic bag around her bony knees.
a grip of viscous liquid. the life kept inside. a clear

tube feeds the lamb fetus bright red blood. like a mother.
like an umbilical cord. the lamb is alive. the lamb is being born.

the lamb isn't broken. at all.

PHOTOGRAPHING THE BLACK HOLE

this is a faster passage of time. the clocks warp
and pre-correct in silly spasms of relativity.

no one ever thought we were telling the truth.
the Earth, falling into the sun—being sucked in,

slowly. feet first, you stretch apart in incredible
height. the tidal force splitting you in neat halves.

extruded like toothpaste. in fourth grade, we called
this phenomena human spaghetti. a stream of fleshy particles.

the black hole looking like a sad circle. all the wild theories
in a glossy illustration. when they take the picture,

maybe it will look like nothing.
maybe it will look like everything.

RIFLE SEASON

they come north for the woods.
for the soggy overhang of trees.

the dampened noise and the echo.
for the deer. the blood. the bullets.

quick and vicious. the season brings
the deer blinds. men clothed in forest.

they rock their guns to sleep, cradle
the metal bodies. here for the fur

harvesting. the trapping. the hard
and silver teeth. the stocked freezers

swirling with ice. with ink-dark meat,
sinew. blood unravels onto concrete

floors in damp garages. these men do not
surprise me—their hands, dirty, coarse.

their tongues turn to gold in their mouths.
they apologize, but their teeth are steel

cages. they chomp and glint—they sparkle.
it doesn't matter—I'm wounded. I limp

into a clearing lit by the sun. maybe I'll be safe here.
I'm always surprised when they find me.

the men: more and more of them tumble
from the fog. their breath dirties the melting

snow. the deer, even, spooked. hooves hurried
and sharp. maybe I'll wear fluorescent orange

next time. maybe I'll carry a whistle that calls the sky.
the grouse, the crow, a dissimulation of birds.

SENDING A BOOK TO A BOY

the boy from louisiana was short
and told me too much over the phone.
he stopped talking to me after i drove
to chicago to meet him. this was a small
balloon in my chest. the whole drive home,
wondering what i said. the jacket i wore,
too black and long to my knees. the way
i joked that the cold wasn't cold at all,
and pulled the light from the sky. i waited
in millennium park for anything to happen.
for the sun to explode. for the bean sculpture
to turn into a bird made of mirrors. the art
institute was too quiet and when we looked
at a pile of potatoes connected to wires
we did not know what to say. the security
guard insisted that the potatoes weighed 8,000
pounds. we agreed that this was a reasonable
estimate. i gave the boy a book and he gave
me nothing. his sweater was rough and hard
against my cheek when he hugged me. somehow,
when my uber driver took too long to find me,
I knew I would never see him again. this silly
internet, this small and inconceivable love, who
ever knew what was really happening. nothing,
you girl with no foresight. nothing.

MAPPING MY FATHER

and the houses he has lived in. the grave
where his mother is buried. the grave that, someday,

looks like my own. at the green house, my father's ghost
throws rocks at the brick wall of the storage facility

next door. the train tracks run down the center
of the street. he places pennies under the wheels

as they burn by in a crash of metal. this home at the end
of the lake. where the water stops and says look.

the truth doesn't always hurt—sometimes the town is
just the town. the siding is painted green and it breaks

my father's heart. sometimes, the flowers in the cemetery
and the graves are dead and it doesn't feel like anything.

I forgive all these things. I forgive the broken air
conditioning, the loneliness that feels round as an egg.

I forgive my father, too. for his discolored smile. all
the ways he tore me down to bone and built me up

again in blood and light. for catching me when I held
my breath too long. I wanted that wood floor. that fall.

that wet, freshly cut lawn. I need to wake up. I wonder
where my father will be buried. next to the grave that is

my name. next to his father who has a place. the gulls
in Michigan City scream like they know all the answers.

they have the keys to every prison in town.

THE LIBRARY WILL BE CLOSING IN 15 MINUTES

I am an adult and I am reading large books, but
when the voice sizzles through the quiet,

I am suddenly back in my childhood
library. in the primary-colored kids' section.

I am surrounded by VHS shelves and picture
books. foam mats shaped like simple puzzles.

I gather my selections around me as I will
my parents to come collect me. to remember

I am in the basement of this muddy-brick building.
I am afraid to get trapped in the library. forgotten

in the sea of metal carts and low ceilings.
the library is gaping quicksand until I am safely out the door.

until the beanbag chairs no longer hold my shape.
in 1996, an episode of *Arthur* called "Locked in the Library"

is released. Arthur and Francine are trapped
in the library at night. the grandfather clock turns

into a growling monster. the trees outside become shivering
beasts. I do not remember this episode, but

I can only imagine I saw, somehow, what
the night would unleash. how quickly

the books would become bats. now, I know how fast the clock
clicks into the dark. I am still swift to pack up my things. funny,

how the night turns the fireplaces into
screaming bellows. how the flat, grey

stones morph into gargoyles.

WOOLLY BONES

you get one day to dig, the farmer said, *the harvest is here*.
this could have been the cornfield on the corner where the white
dog barked at cars. this could have been my sister's cigarette
hiding spot— in the skull of the beast.

there's a mammoth in michigan. there's tusks in my backyard.
there's vertebrae in my teeth. this could have been
the mud in my basement.

once, a deer left its head in a hayfield off the road.
with a shovel, I hid it in the trees.
I polished its ribs with bleach. this was a death I knew.

maybe the mammoth was hungry, or cold, or ancient, or sick,
or so sure it was dying and the raw field of green seemed
like the right sleep, seemed like the right spot to fertilize
the crop—but maybe killed, by spear or arrow.
kept in a pond as a prize. the bones showed signs of butchering.

those soybeans must have burst from the ground the year they planted.
I wonder if the farmer questioned that first grassy crop. doubted
how the corn was sweetest the next year. knew how mud ran
so deep it hit bones, how water pooled there in the heavy season.

noticed how the rain knew where the thirst was, or how sometimes,
when he tilled the fields, the dirt flew through the air
like fur.

BLOSSOM ROT

you may wonder what I'm doing here—
planting lilies in
your backyard, elbow deep
in earth. see, I have dug up
these worms for you:
pink ribbons for your hair.

this is how I tell you I love you.
from the dirt-sweet wet of my mouth,
I give you two acorns.

crows assemble
on the long necks of pines,
a dog whimpers on my walk home,
tied to a white porch.
a man and woman drag metal detectors
through their tangled yard.

this is how I tell you I love you.
love, as in, you bury me.

I give you antler velvet,
a pinecone the size of a fox,
I give you a lightning bolt,
I give, and the giving
is a shadow of bats.

in the yawn of the hangnail
moon, I eat my own wings.
I am too tired for the heavy door.

I give you
a handful of gutted lilies
and name them my heart.

THE FARM

my sister there. outside
the wet black city—in the gully's
darkest puddle.

I draw the vista in my sleep,
its slates and metals pinching
until ground becomes dirt and dirt.

hunter's mud collects
in her boots, the chickens claw
shit through the fields.

the hay is stacked
in nests of fire—a cigarette bounces
from her mouth as she speaks.

a nymph in the hoop house—
she checks her lipstick
in the tractor's skeleton.

aphids blink through sweet
lettuces and greens
—small, soft-bodied,

fat with sap.
she rolls them between her fingers.

the farm is gardening a swarm of worms. they live
in tall buckets of vinegar, they eat the sour
from the dirt.

when i go to see her, I follow
the water, blindly, as if I know how dark
the shore runs, in inky bolts of blue.

the farm is something I often forget—
it lives beneath a tooth in my mouth.

MUD CEREMONY

today, the jackal marries
the fox. the fox is dead,
but still red as a split lip—
a clumsy pair.

the jackal is a witch kissing
her wife—the sunshower
wets her fur like a compulsion
of storm, of sun beat to blue
fire. a bright devil.

there are many things I have never done.
buy a lottery ticket. call
a radio station. play slots.
catch a bouquet of wisteria
or rats. a plague. maybe

I'm the witch—the wolf
in a wedding dress. I can't
say why the crow I marry
isn't in the folklore—
isn't in the black book.

when the rain spills from
the sky's mouth like milk—
somewhere, a wife is crying.
maybe I'm the wife. the devil
beating me, fighting
over my chicken bone;

bloody, stripped of meat.
this is when the funfair
begins. when the weather
turns salty—whips the dead
fox redder.

III.

SOMEWHERE INBETWEEN

my mother's kitchen is not my
mother's but my father's. he spins the
dense iron pots like slick vinyl records.
he burns the butter and does not
apologize. the basil pesto gleams on
spaghetti like emerald jewelry. glossy
and loose. my mother knows how to
make grilled cheese and fried eggs. she
knows how to hook the propane tank
to the grill but not how long to wait
until the raw is gone. my father's heavy
knives snap back deep into the wooden
block that keeps them. i place slices of
orange into my mouth and smile like a
canary. this is our new kitchen, with the
big island and countertops the color of
mud. my sister rearranges the stools
like dominoes. slams the glass cabinets
shut as though they will never break.
the inside of the oven gleams like it has
never been used. we know it has. we
know this house was not built for us.
we know the floor plan is strange and
unfamiliar— the appliances have
misplaced handles. but when my
mother burns the bread, the char
tastes the same. it coats our mouths
like ash.

2 LITTLE LIES

when I watch my mother from above,
she is red-faced and a rose. her mouth

is oily and I am on my way.
my father is wearing a tux. I have never

seen him in a bow-tie. his hair looks
soft and I reach to touch it, but come back

with air. with chicago's sweet breath.
I let out my first wet scream. my mother's

hair sticks to her neck. she is a salt-licked ocean.
my father is crying and laughing and grinding his teeth.

what he is thinking is a lie. my mother whispers
into my cheek and this is a lie, too. I have never known

my parents as liars. where is my full set of straight
teeth? where are my unmarried knuckles?

I think to call out, but my voice
is the creaking of the door.

the blip of my mother's heart monitor.
but there I am, crying and red

and full of life and lies. I reach
for the blanket I am swaddled in. my hand

comes back with a fistful of ash. I have touched
the lies and they want me back.

FAVOR

after Li-Young Lee

a field of poppies blooms
between my fingers—
my father grabs a needle
and tells me to hold still.

I am not a patient child,
or a curator of pain , so I become
a young bird,
underneath.

I dig at a splinter
until my palm begins to bleed.
a rose opens.

I remember my small white hand,
a ceramic plate, and a circle
of red, growing as the heart
in my palm pulsed free.

my fathers voice is low,
and his fingers are much bigger
than mine—he loses me
in a story about lake shore drive,
or fire, or paddling a boat.

the wood is released from me,
and I don't
cry, but place my mouth
over the cut; feeling
foreign, feeling like the hand
of a bird.

I am not patient. my father
whispers in a clatter of silver.
I become an eagle,
underneath—
my father, preening my wings.

MAKING A MEAL

I find a spot in my kitchen
that I do not love.

there, I peel a sweet potato.
I smash garlic into guts.
I cut my thumb and stuff it,
singing, into my mouth.

next, I dismember an animal.
I relieve it of its skeleton,
its dense assemblage.

it's sorcery: parts
and bones and flesh and
onion skins—brown moons,
coalesce into broth,
into red-
lipped harvest.

the unused, the castoff
roots, the dirt licked husks.
in the stained core of the bird
hides the deep, lush savor.

when I boil milk,
the kitchen smells like my mother.
when oil pops and blisters
my skin, I become a blue plate.

I stop sharpening my knives.
I collect these ruins like gold,
roast them 'til honeyed.

my kitchen is a simmering
orchard—nourish,
fill, and enough.
a cycle of ashes.

RAW HONEY

on the hills of the antelope valley poppy reserve in california,
the blooms of the state flower billow like small red dresses.

like orange streaks of citrus. the poppies are thin-hipped, silky
and hammered with fire. my sister tears the poppies from the ground

like weeds. she hides her heroin in the car we share.
like some kind of milky and boiled down

monster. it's not the same. i know. but the opium poppy looks
just as much like blood. when the poppies die in california, the valley

looks like a great, wide grave. like the same slash and burn a world away.
when the opium poppies' petals fall apart like lanterns of fire, the bulb

is cut with a knife. pressed into a brick. strained through burlap and the dead
stems of a flower that once was decoration. that once knew nothing

but to bloom.

THIS HISTORY OF LUNGS

1. There are twelve worries she does not know, but she carries them onto the plane, through the ocean's bleak face.
2. She is a ruby in the night before Halloween.
3. Her throat is a restless pigeon in a king bed.
4. When she gets an MRI, they have to cut her wedding ring off.
5. She is a diary I am keeping.
6. She is a painter of the bedroom ceiling, carpenter's daughter, blood-sick nurse—menace in a pressed suit.
7. A man threatens to bring his gun to the office with my mother in the barrel's ink
8. She works behind blue windows of wake, face to mouth to metal.
9. In Thailand, she eats grasshoppers and calls my father when he wakes up.
10. She buries cubes of butter into a baked potato and chews the skin.
11. When I see my mother, I see her hands twisting into knuckle.
12. She is a child of splinter, a history bruised blue by wine.
13. In California, she sobs into the herb garden when she misses my phone call.
14. She collapses as a bale of parched hay.
15. The drought has taken her tongue.

THIS IS HOW I WILL LEAVE YOU

first, I will ask you the names of things. the plum
tree in the field. the crackling firewood and my
grief. I am always ripening—my skin bruising and
shifting color. I am unable to tell if the sweetness
is coming or going. when I look out the window,
I can't find a single crow. no lonely pigeon cooing
from an eave. it was just the snow, the white— I will
escape into it. from the wet warmth of your body.
the mist curls and lets go of the water. the lake roars
because it is hungry. you are here and I am away.
we are little strangers. let's not act like we know
each other well. let's run through the yard,
stealing fruit.

LOVING WITH SCISSORS

this is a place of joy, I guess. the sun rises and sets
in brassy exclamations of light. I write poems

about being in love with nobody but wind.
my mouth is a little red animal. I love lightning—

I live at the top of a hill and roll my body down
until my bones hit lake. it is a big fake dream, living

here in a house made of ghosts. it is easy
to be invisible in the woods. if I start making

a movie out of my life. if I pan out to show
a blue car rumbling through Kentucky. if I cut open

the chest of a wolf and find milk. what then.
I could leave here forever and never come back.

I'll say: this is the road I traveled away from
this place. this is the national forest that cried

out my name as I drove. this is the coyote I saw
as I left the state. I've never seen a coyote, but

I sometimes dream of heaven. every place I have
known has hurt me. this is to say

that I miss the soft things. feeling safe
in crosswalks of cities I love. I drop a pair

of scissors and catch them, the shears
open against my hand like wings.

SELF PORTRAIT AS/WITH SISTER

it is a beautiful day in Michigan, and she is
rising and setting like a reliable, burning planet.
she doesn't need me anymore—it's okay.

I'm accepting this. sometimes, she
stands still and life bustles around
her in a blur. she shaves her head, and
I shave down my bones in her shadow.

being an older sister is hard. I imagine,
being a younger sister is harder. even
the stars dye our arms with blue inks.
between the bridge and Canada, she
comments on the weather. her dogs

run through the snow in flurries
of beige. she is electric. she is a forest.
she is made of moths and gets a tattoo

of the death's head hawkmoth. *just like*

silence of the lambs, she says, *mom's*
favorite movie. she grins and the small
vein at the center of her forehead pulses.

for a moment—is full of blood and sun.

I do not need to be told that I know nothing
about wine. or men. or Detroit. or electronic
dance music. I know she thinks I only have

the most useless of knowledge: love poems.

rhyme schemes. why she dreams of her teeth
falling out of her mouth. I notice that her shoes
are covered in mud. I have the same pair. shined.

gleaming. when I visit her, I always do her dishes.

clean out her car. I find an old pickle. dog toys.
an uneaten black apple. between us, I see a small
ocean. a yellow raft floats across our arms,

outstretched. she hugs me whenever she sees me.

on the shortest phone calls, she says
I love you. and I say I love you, too. we both
know why. this is our way. our forced, grinning
photograph. our aching pattern of blood.

FEVER

I have some explaining to do—
the gun wasn't mine. I didn't lose the keys

but knew I'd never need them again.
I twisted them in the door until the metal

broke into silver. until the lock had
swallowed them up. the bullets were really

unburied roses. the bulbs still fleshy and soft—
dormant in the winter. the truth is, I often

think of the breads we made. the sourness
of the yeast. the way we punched down

the leavened loaves and made them obey.
when a baby screams, it all floods back—

the unflinching stumps of dead trees. the way
I cry back at the face of something wailing.

my body calling out and me, smothering
it into silence. into awkward and hungry

submission. the horses make the thunder
in the night. I can hear them. they make

my blood run warm.

THIS IS THE REALM OF LAST CHANCES

it could be anything airplanes, mice, socks, wolves these sounds, they turn to ghosts in the night.
their howls become me, somehow. I always find a way to write about birds, even though I
know that everyone expects me to write about birds their wings, maybe, their small and yellow
beaks, their flight and descent the patterns they make in the sky. there I go, my obsession
turning to ash. I will give you all the wolf poems and call them a book, or my musings on
danger and its definitions. maybe there is a place for all of this, some last chance that erases the
fear. it wraps up all my vague and bloom-red scars into lush bouquets of blood. this is how I
search for the wolves. find my blindness in a place I cannot come to terms with. it is a weakness,
coming to the woods and forgiving the shore. I cannot own or disown anything. not in the
right way. it's all too final for its own good.

A COMPULSION OF LETTERS

I cannot walk through my front door without
dunking my hand into my empty mailbox.

I know it is empty. sometimes, it is a Sunday evening.
sometimes, I have already intercepted my mailman.

something, though, pulls my hand into
the metal box. it is a strange routine

of comfort. of knowing there is nothing
left. when I lived in Florida, and my mailbox

had a key, I still opened the box every time
I walked by. sometimes, 5 times a day.

when I stumble into my home, drunk,
I check the mail as if midnight has delivered

letters in my absence. I am not often expecting
important mail. an electric bill, a free underwear voucher,

a coupon for pizza, a call for donations from
the local animal shelter. recently, two wedding

invitations from friends I have not congratulated.
every time I move, my mail takes

weeks to start arriving. I still check
the mail everyday. for once, a small black box

taken care of. emptied out like it should be.
nothing but an echo. my knuckles clacking

against the walls.

PHEDRAS DE BLONDEL

name him Geronimo, a collection
of braid, name him
 Florida.

the gelding is a head and neck,
 barrel of ribs, alive
for the butchering.

hooves to wither, a stack
of hands above the twitching chest.

wild to the slaughter, to the jump
 of the fence.

the farm is a theft of blood—
 a red horse
 in the morning, he is
 a body in mid-run—
orphaned chest.

 shoulder harvest at the joint,
the thigh
 over ice.
cannon bone scraped clean. bit clenched
 until gums bleed.

a prize in the dusk field, the soaked grass
 nibbled short,
grey velvet
 of the muzzle—lost
in the gallop of panic, the coo
 of the sweet knife
for meat, for the black
 gold morning,
for the memory gone West—pierced

until the fluttering quiet,
 in illusion:
a pasture—a garden,
 separated in dust.

THINGS THAT HAVE LOST THEIR POWER

what i'm telling you is all truth. i don't know why you'd think
i'd lie to you. next door, bells are ringing a sad song. i can hear
the muffled metal through the walls. my dear, listen: the snow
is falling in sheets of milk. california is on fire. the horses are burning
in pairs. in dozens. the blazes stop at the ocean and spit at the water.
and what about that storm—it swallowed two people into its belly.
that cold, dark lake. the trees on the ridge splintered like toothpicks.
the power lines brought down like spools of yarn. that man,
with a small girl in his mouth. all the men, their cheeks puffed out—
bulging with milk and hair. those dreams i had as a child. my strong
and clicking knees, how they once could run for miles and knew how
to best carry me. when i think of the word power, i think of electricity.
a spark. fire churning through national parks at hundreds of miles
an hour. i've given up on taking photographs from airplane windows.
nothing looks as impressive on camera. the world lets me down
this way. all the time.

FOR A MOMENT

taking a picture of a picture is a reverie—the photo paper
a white glare of light. the glass in the frame is another
fragile layer. I am in my father's office surrounded

by his shiny black synthesizer equipment, waiting
for the printer to work. its dumb body groaning
with ink and confusion. next to the desk lamp,

a small silver frame. beveled edges. slippery
velvet backing. my grandfather inside—handsome,
young. the side of his suit jacket tucked behind his hip,

his hand on his belt. the wind blowing his tie askew.
the backdrop, a silky blue curtain. my grandmother
next to him. cat-eye glasses. gingham shirt dress.

biting her lip. not dead at all. it's almost like I am meeting
her in this glass box. we are shifting our names
around in our pockets. the clumsy letters mixing and splitting

between us. they do not know what is coming. her deep
and bloodless sleep. his mouth sweet with smoke. her young
face of milk. his cheeks like strong hammers. her earrings,

small circles of moon. I slip the photo out of the frame.
I try taking a picture, but each time, they are more
removed from me. they look less like my blood.

his grip on her shoulder—tight and unimaginary.
her tongue on her lips, holding a word.

UNITS OF SOUND

it was something about how you said my name.
how it escaped your mouth like a knife. “sara”

like it was the first word you learned. like it was
your first cry into the air. it’s easy to forget a name.

but you never forgot mine. you knew it like you
knew your own. you knew it was mine

and you knew that it was as much a part of me
as my bones and my blood. the way you said it—

as though it was meant to serve eternity. it fell out
of your mouth like a spool of my own hair—each time

you said “sara”, I saw a piece of myself growing inside you.
it is not unreasonable to suppose that you did not know

what you were doing. your dangerous preoccupation
with my alphabet. my clumsy inheritance of sounds.

you sang it in a field lit by floodlights. you screamed
it when I ran away—down the beach. down

the stairs. out to where the sea broke into small pieces
of glass. it echoed there. its letters hung in the air

like four paper crows.

LOVE POEM IN WHICH I AM IN LOVE WITH NO ONE

if I die at forty, please do not throw away
my vintage handbags, my oversized tshirts,

my aching chest of drawers. do not misinterpret
my diaries. my calligraphy—meant for no one.

do not search for them. I am too organized
for my own good. loneliness is like that:

knowing what's best for myself quickly becomes
a black and tired chaos. sometimes, I want to die early.

so people will say “wow” or “how sad”,
and my dying will not be ordinary or forgotten

and my obituary—short. I am like my father:
he gives me old, dull knives that I cannot throw away.

I don't know why love is this way. I don't know why
I have given you all of my internet passwords

just in case I lose myself on a two lane road in Michigan. just in case
I forget my name and leave to live with crows. no one knows

what it's like. to remove twigs from my teeth and find
the moon. to cough up a feather and find you. in this future,

people will remember me as beautiful and gracious
and not angry. because I know I will be angry.

LOOK WHAT I HAVE DONE

i welcomed you like a hood of antlers.

like bone broke down to velvet. like growth
and the wind that raised me. in my mind,

heaven is full of animals the earth didn't get to keep.

the nice things
taken away from the shrieking
child with red cheeks.

the do-do. the tasmanian
tiger. the hartebeest. the passenger pigeon.

inside me:
some goddess of war. maybe she carries

a bow and arrow. maybe she is sculpted of marble.

it is friday, and i am swallowing the sun. the rats

in my parent's backyard are so big, so strong,

that they take the traps with them. they snap
in the night, but the yard is empty.

my womanhood
hibernates in the winter. blows shrill whistles

in the damp mornings. croons

the dead birds into small funerals
of feathers.

i must stay calm

so as to preserve my wings. you could destroy them

easily, just like that.

with the bark of a tree.
with a small gun.

FLDDBORN

come taste the grass in my lungs,
it is sweet in the way I know the road home.

you gift me a yellow nest of hay, and you understand
my refusal to learn ritual.

I am too good for that.

my body is pitch and milk. you are a lesson
in remembering the land and my non-place in it.

you are the winter-polished skeleton
of a buck laid down to sleep.

my body is told in the language of gravel—
I would give a nickel for anyone to say my name.

but it's lost, like me, in the North's cold sheath,
its thick meadow of ice.

I THOUGHT THERE WOULD BE MORE WOLVES

here. at the dumb stroke of midnight. in the glass dome of roses.
the woods at the end of the lake. I was taught where to wait
patiently. to fold my hands on my lap like two sorry doves. to tie
my shoes in knots too tight to unravel. it's incredible how the oceans
meet and trade salinity. how carbonation stings our throats but we keep
drinking. I was never a wolf, but a girl with a red-brick house. a girl with
a bicycle made of puzzle pieces. I wasn't a deer. I wasn't a lamb. all my wars
with the concrete were over. I'm driving alone to everywhere I am going.
I can't strip my skin away. my fur. my wolf teeth. yellow and dull.